

Sandys Row Synagogue

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NEWS RELEASE

Embargoed until 1100 12 May 2009

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Sandys Row Synagogue "little known architectural gem" receives historic Heritage Lottery Fund award.

The English Heritage-Heritage Lottery Fund Places of Worship Scheme today announced that it has awarded over £250,000 towards essential building works that will ensure the survival of one of the oldest synagogue buildings in the country, and the oldest Ashkenazi community in London.

"Without the grant, this unique link back to the great Jewish migration of the 19th Century would be in danger of physical collapse. Now the Huguenot roof and walls can look forward to their 250th anniversary in 2013 and beyond! This marks a major milestone for the Sandys Row Synagogue community, as we build a vibrant programme of religious and cultural activities, and develop a greater role in celebrating Jewish East End heritage. It is a fantastic starting point — and there is much more we need to do!" says Board Member and spokesperson Jack Gilbert, who pays tribute to the personal letters of endorsement sent by both the Chief Rabbi, Sir Jonathan Sacks, and Henry Grunwald QC, President of the Board of Deputies.

On hearing the news Mr Grunwald commented, "I am really pleased that English Heritage and the Heritage Lottery Fund have jointly agreed to provide this funding for Sandys Row. The synagogue is an important part of the community's heritage. It still plays an important role in the Jewish life of Central London and this funding will ensure the building's future. Well done to all concerned."

The award is the largest ever given to a Grade 2 Jewish building and is second only to the award of £338,000 to Brighton Synagogue in 2003.

Anthony Walker of Fashion Street-based dlG Architects, a well-respected conservation architect who teaches on the Masters programmes of the Architects Association and York University, has led the synagogue's team of advisors. "This is an exciting opportunity to begin the restoration of a little known architectural gem in the heart of Spitalfields. It encapsulates the social changes in the area and the evolution of the building as it came to be used by several different faiths."

He explains the background, "Last September, in the course of detailed research by conservation surveyors, we discovered that two of the four corner roof supports were completely rotten. The entire Huguenot structure was being held up by the 18th Century ceiling plasterwork!"

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Jack Gilbert continues, “Within days, the Synagogue Board were able to implement emergency, temporary support structures to prevent an imminent collapse but without this grant the future would be bleak.”

Mr Gilbert also warns against complacency, “There are other urgent issues that need to be addressed and this grant does not cover them.”

The award comes at a time when Sandys Row Synagogue is considering the feasibility of creating an East End Heritage educational centre and alongside the Monday-Thursday lunchtime *minyan* (prayer group), fortnightly *Shabbat* services and regular tours, they will shortly be adding a women’s *minyan* and evening cultural activities.

Ending on an upbeat note, Mr Gilbert declared, “This is a really exciting time. We have a board ranging in age from 23 to 78, and more and more people are getting in touch - many descendants of local residents who like the informality and warmth. This not only about restoring and enhancing a unique building, it is about strengthening our community, and collecting and bringing to life a unique part of the history of the East End and of British Jewry. We see ourselves as an asset for everyone and invite volunteers of all ages and backgrounds!

Alongside Sandys Row Synagogue, a Sikh temple in Nottingham, and a Greek Orthodox church in Salford are among the buildings featuring in the package of grants worth £7 million for essential repairs to Grade II listed places of worship across England. The largest grant of £323,000 will be given to Alderley Edge Methodist Church in Cheshire for repairs to the tower and spire. The grants will help to repair 56 historic places of worship which are used by a broad range of faiths.

Dr Simon Thurley, Chief Executive of English Heritage, said,

“English Heritage is delighted to be announcing these repair grants for historic places of worship – particularly on the day that the government launches ‘World Class Places’. Historic buildings connect us to our past and enhance our enjoyment of the places in which we live, work and worship. These beautiful listed buildings are at the heart of our communities and they must remain in active use. We are especially pleased that buildings used by such a broad range of religious groups are being awarded grants this year.”

Carole Souter, Chief Executive of HLF, speaking about all the awards, said:

“These special buildings are right at the centre of community life and urgently need investment. This money will not only protect them for the future but also help to create 175 jobs. Looking after our heritage is an incredibly effective way of supporting community life generally.

This is recognised in today’s Government strategy for improving quality of place. Serious investment like this goes well beyond looking after the bricks and mortar of a building, bringing with it substantial social and economic benefits too.”

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NOTES TO EDITORS

Please see attached background briefing. Images on news section of <http://www.sandysrow.org.uk/>

Diana Evans, Head of Places of Worship Policy at English Heritage is available for interview.

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BACKGROUND BRIEFING

SANDYS ROW SYNAGOGUE — BRIDGING THREE CENTURIES

Our Heritage

This is the oldest Ashkenazi synagogue in London. It is the most important site, still in use, that connects back to the start of the great 19th Century migration of poor Ashkenazi Jews into Britain.

Our building is almost 250 years old. In 1763 a French Huguenot community, meeting off Petticoat Lane, purchased an old chapel and its freehold on this site for £400. *L'Eglise d'Artillerie* was dedicated in late November 1766. It remained open until 1786, when it merged with the London Walloon Church.

For the next fifty years, the church was let out to several Baptist congregations, becoming known as Salem Chapel and then Parliament Court Chapel.

In 1853/4 about 50 poor Dutch Jewish families founded a chevrah, or kind of Friendly Society with a small synagogue attached. Chebrath Menahem Abelim Chesed Ve'Emeth (Society for the care of mourners, for loving-kindness and for truth) was the first of its kind; many more were formed in the following 50 years as large numbers of Jews arrived from poverty and persecution in Central/Eastern Europe.

The community has always had a uniquely independent streak. By 1867, it had grown to five hundred members when it acquired leasehold of the French chapel in 1867, having found a champion in architect Nathan Joseph. It was particularly suitable because it had a balcony and was on an East-West axis, albeit facing westwards. Joseph blocked up the original entry (still visible) and formed a new one in Sandys Row together with a new three storey building for offices and caretaker's accommodation.

In 1870, this Ashkenazi synagogue was formally consecrated by the leading Sephardi rabbi, *Haham* Benjamin Artom from nearby Bevis Marks Synagogue, because the Chief Rabbi (the leading Ashkenazi Rabbi) opposed the establishment of a new synagogue in the area.

This was the largest of the congregations that founded the Federation of Synagogues in November 1887. It left the Federation in 1899, became an associate of the United Synagogue in 1922, and finally seceded from the United Synagogue in 1949.

The basement stores of the synagogue contain Jewish artefacts, prayer-books and documents dating back into the 18th Century, with much important material depicting East End Jewish life before and after the Second World War.

Today, there is a regular afternoon service on weekdays for city workers, as well as *Shabbat* and Festival services (usually at weekends). A women-only service will be starting shortly and there are regular tours.

At the heart of Sandys Row are its members, and the generations of lay and spiritual leadership without whom it would not have survived. Many are now elderly and retain unique oral histories. There is also an increasing number of newcomers and descendants attracted back to Sandys Row by the unique informal spirituality, the friendliness and the historic resonance.

Our Five Year Vision

1) Preserve the building

We are committed to ensuring the fabric of the building inside and out is safe. The refurbished roof will be followed by renewed wiring, health and safety features and disabled access.

2) Conserve and catalogue

We urgently need to collect the oral histories, and catalogue and conserve our artefacts.

3) Strengthen community life and community connections

We are building our programme of religious and cultural activity and our partnerships.

4) Create a heritage educational centre

We are now investigating the feasibility of creating a much needed Jewish East End Heritage Centre, to house our collection and much else besides, utilising the hidden lower ground floor that extends across the entire cross section of the site.